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Tips for Teaching Comprehension Questioning

Tips for Questioning Readers for Comprehension

The following provides information on the types of questions and strategies that can be used to develop a meaningful discussion of a book. Through creative questioning, the reader should be encouraged to share ideas about the book, and to identify and explore different types of information presented in the book. Keep in mind that the discussion should not be a series of questions fired at the reader.

Closed questions are the kind of questions that require a short response that can be found in the text, for example: *What happened first in the story?* Or, *What is a reptile?* Many comprehension tests use closed questions, and readers need to know how to find the information in the book with which to answer the questions. Encourage the child to go back to the book to check his/her responses to closed questions, or guide the child to find the answer to a closed question if she or he isn't sure where to go to find the information. Use prompts such as:

- ☐ *That sounds right. Let's check the book to make sure.*
- ☐ *Show me where the book tells you that.*
- ☐ *Where can we look in the book to find the answer?*

Closed questions often begin with words such as *who, what, where, when, list, describe, name*. Examples of closed questions are:

- ☐ *Where did the story take place?*
- ☐ *Name an example of a reptile.*
- ☐ *Do you think the boy will ever get his wish?*

Open questions require more in-depth answers. Often the answer is not explicitly stated in the text. Some open questions require the reader to use her or his own ideas plus the information in the book to draw a conclusion about the topic. Other open questions require the reader to voice an opinion. Still others may require the reader to apply what she or he has read to a different situation. Open questions can often begin with words such as *why, how, explain, and what if*. Examples of open questions are:

- ☐ *How would you describe the setting of the story?*
- ☐ *How are reptiles different from amphibians?*
- ☐ *What would happen if the boy got his wish?*

Yes/no questions are closed questions that effectively cut off the discussion by setting up the child to answer with a yes or a no. Examples of this type of question are: *Did you like the story?* Or, *Is a snake a reptile?* While it is sometimes okay, and even sometimes necessary, to ask yes/no questions, the tutor should be careful not to overemphasize them and be aware when the discussion is being closed down because of them. If yes/no questions are asked, they should always be followed up with a clarification question, such as: *Why?* Or, *How do you know?* The tutor should look for ways to avoid yes/no questions and try to extend the discussion with different types of question such as: *How do you feel about this story?* Or, *What makes a snake a reptile?*

Tips for Teaching **Comprehension Questioning** *(continued)*

Retelling questions have the child retell stories she or he has read. A prompt that gets the retelling started could be: *Tell me what happened in the story.* If the child needs more prompting, other prompts could be: *What was this story about? Who was in the story?* Sometimes a child may stop during the retelling. Prompt with questions such as: *Then what happened?* Or, *What did [character] do then?* When having the child retell nonfiction books, ask her or him to tell what the book was about (for example, reptiles) and to tell some facts she or he has learned about the topic. Prompt with: *What else did you learn?*

Wait-time is the amount of time that elapses between asking a question and either getting an answer from the child or providing more prompts. For closed questions, allow at least 3 seconds for the child to think and respond. For more complex questions, allow 10 or more seconds before rephrasing the question or providing hints to help the child.

Positive reinforcement should be used to reward the child for correct behavior and to encourage more participation. Nonverbal reinforcement can include facial expressions such as smiling, body language such as nodding, and eye contact. Verbal reinforcement involves using oral feedback such as: *Well done!* Or, *That's a good answer.* The tutor can make the child feel comfortable by using the pronoun *we*, and indicating that the problem can be solved together, for example: *That's a tricky question, isn't it? Let's see if we can find the answer in the book.*

A Model for Questioning

The following examples show a series of questions based on the story *The Three Little Pigs*. The first example uses both open and closed questions and encourages discussion. It encourages the child to find and check her or his responses in the book. It also encourages the child to think beyond the story and offer opinions.

By focusing on mainly closed questions, the second example stifles the discussion. The tutor doesn't allow the child time to think about the questions, and the tutor doesn't show the child where to find the answers to questions she or he can't answer.

Example One (Good questioning technique)

T: Who was in this story? (Closed question)

C: The three pigs and there was a wolf, too.

T: What was the first thing that happened in the story? (Closed question)

C: ummm...(Child hesitates several seconds.)

T: (After allowing the child time to think about the question...) Let's turn to the first page and see. (Model where to go to find the answer to the question.)

C: The first pig built a house of sticks.

T: Good. What do you think of this pig's choice of building material? (Open question)

C: It wasn't good and the wolf could blow it down because it wasn't strong.

Tips for Teaching **Comprehension Questioning** *(continued)*

- T:** Yes, the wolf certainly did, didn't he? What did the second pig use for his house? (Offer positive reinforcement and follow with a closed question.)
- C:** Straw.
- T:** Good. Show me the part of the story that tells you this. (Encourage use of the book to confirm information.)
- T:** How would you describe the third pig? (Open question)
- C:** He was real smart because he knew the wolf would come and he used bricks.
- T:** Why do you think using bricks shows he was smart? (Offer open question and pick up on the child's previous response. This makes the discussion more interactive.)
- C:** Well, he must know something about building houses and what would be good to use. He thought of things like the wolf coming and he knew he should protect himself.
- T:** How would you describe the wolf? (Open question)
- C:** He was hungry and he was scary, but he wasn't as smart as the pig because they tricked him.
- T:** How do you think the author of this story feels about wolves? (Open question)
- C:** I don't think he likes wolves much because he makes the wolf bad and he says "the big, bad wolf." And the wolf gets tricked at the end.
- T:** If you could change the ending of the story, how would you end the story? (Open question)
- C:** Maybe the wolf could say he was sorry and he wouldn't eat them if they gave him some of their dinner. And maybe they would be friends.
- T:** I like that. That sounds like a good way to end the story. (Offer positive reinforcement of child's ideas.)

Example Two (Poor questioning technique)

- T:** Who was in this story? Who were the characters? (Tutor doesn't allow wait time before rephrasing the question.)
- C:** The three pigs and there was a wolf, too.
- T:** What was the first thing that happened in the story?
- C:** ummm (child hesitates for a moment)
- T:** The first pig built a house of sticks, didn't he? (Tutor doesn't allow enough time for the child to think and answers the question for the child. The tutor has missed an opportunity to model how to find information in the text.)
- T:** O.K., what did the second pig use?
- C:** I can't remember.

Tips for Teaching **Comprehension Questioning** *(continued)*

T: He used straw, didn't he? (Tutor doesn't encourage the child to find the answer in the book, and answers for the child. The tutor has used only closed questions so far.)

C: Yes.

T: Was that very smart? (This is another closed question, and a yes/no question.)

C: No.

T: Why? (It is good to follow up a yes/no question with *Why?* To avoid having to ask two questions to get to the response he/she wanted, the tutor could have asked an open question, such as: *What do you think about using straw to build a house?*)

C: Because his house got blown down.

T: Was the third little pig smart? (This is yet another closed question and also a yes/no question. The tutor could have asked: *How would you describe the third pig?* Or, *What does choosing bricks for his house tell you about the third pig?* Questions such as these help the child to think more broadly.)

C: Yes.

T: Why do you think so? (Open question)

C: Because he used bricks and he knew he would be safe.

T: Did you like the way the story ended? (Another yes/no closed question which should be followed up with: *Tell me why.* The question could have been worded: *How would you end the story?*)

C: Yes.